

La Florida, Land of Flowers

A Wildflower Marketing Opportunity



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Introduction

The 2013 Quincentennial commemoration of Spain in *La Florida*, “land of flowers,” promises an exceptional opportunity for aligning ecotourism with wildflower viewing – the chance to experience and learn about native wildflowers and their purpose and place in Florida’s history, ecology, and economy.

In 1513, Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de Leon named the state *La Florida* – “Land of Flowers” – for the Easter season in which he made his discovery. The choice also may have been influenced by the land’s abundant and beautiful flowers. His landing in *La Florida* almost 500 years ago represents the first entry of Europe in America. In 2013, when the state commemorates its Quincentennial, wildflowers should be restored and remembered as Florida’s original icon.

Energized by Florida sunshine, wildflowers bloom abundantly in spring, summer and fall almost everywhere that natural lands remain and roadsides are unmowed. These seasonal displays are a themed attraction similar to spectacular displays of fall foliage of the Northeast in their capacity to draw visitors.

As an offshoot of nature viewing and wildlife viewing, wildflower viewing’s potential is just being recognized. The importance of this particular brand of ecotourism cannot be understated – both in terms of economic benefit and of relating Florida’s memorable sense of place while teaching the importance of maintaining biodiversity, healthy ecosystems and stable habitats.

Almost 67 percent of respondents in a 2009 Visit Florida tourism study said they participated in nature-based activities in the past year – an increase of 11.5 percent from 2008. Of those who participated in nature-based activities, 39 percent planned their trips with nature-based activities in mind. These activities include hiking, wildlife viewing and enjoying parks – all conducive to the development of wildflower viewing.

Based on the growing interest in nature-viewing and green lifestyles, there is a large well of ecotourists from which to draw. Consider:

- More than 71 million participants, ages 16 years and older, and 11.5 million participants ages 6 to 15 participated in wildlife viewing in 2007 (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service).
- Since 2001, the number of people who visited Florida to view wildlife has increased 50 percent.



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- In 2006, 746,000 nonresident wildlife viewers in Florida contributed \$653 million to the state economy.
- Wildlife viewing is attracting an ever-larger audience, with a 13 percent boost between 1996 and 2006. Florida ranks second highest (after California) in the U.S. in the number of people participating in wildlife-viewing recreation (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, 2007).
- Nationally, more than 87 million Americans ages 16 years and older (38 percent of the U.S. population) participate in some recreational activity related to fish and wildlife in 2006 (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, 2007).

Roadsides are Florida's most visited and most visible landscape, creating first and lasting impressions. Florida's rural areas – especially its northern counties – have what are arguably the state's richest roadside stands of native flowers. A stretch of County Road 379 in Liberty County, for instance, is widely considered by botanists and wildflower enthusiasts to be the best place in Florida – if not the entire Southeastern U.S. – to view roadside wildflowers. To the chagrin of enthusiasts and enlightened entrepreneurs, state and county road departments carelessly mow roadsides, stealing away the time and space needed for wildflowers to grow.

Therein lies the paradox of *La Florida's* wildflowers – appreciated by a growing number of residents and visitors but still unrecognized as an economic ecotourism resource in much of the state.

Recognizing that wildflower viewing holds tremendous potential, the Florida Wildflower Foundation commissioned this study to assess regional readiness, identify obstacles and discover best practices for growing wildflower tourism.

Research methods

Primary research goals included:

- Identify best marketing practices in places where wildflower tourism and fall foliage tourism already exist.
- Identify the most wildflower profuse parts of the state and the seasons of greatest profusion.
- Evaluate Florida's overall readiness and target test markets, and determining how these currently support tourism.
- Identify what institutions should be or already are somewhat involved in developing this tourism opportunity.

Research for this report was conducted in fall 2010 by tourism advocate/contractor Herbert Hiller of DeLand, Fla., through telephone interviews, Internet research and field studies.

Significant Findings

1. Fall foliage



Fall foliage has been an attractive feature of tourism in northeastern America for at least 200 years. Proprietors have situated inns for guests to enjoy the seasonal beauty, and business promoters have combined foliage tours with paddling, with fishing, wine sampling, regional art exhibitions and a host of other activities. Effective promotion has turned the once fall "shoulder season" into a favorite vacation time.

The popularity of "leaf-peeping" is undeniable. New Hampshire's 2010 economic prediction for its fall foliage season was spending of \$1.1 billion by 7.7 million state residents and visitors. In Maine, fall visitors account for 25 percent of the state's annual tourism spending. In 2009, the state had 8.6 million visitors in September and October, spending \$1.5 billion (www.HartfordBusiness.com).

The output of areas benefiting from fall foliage is chiefly products and events. Chambers of Commerce and volunteer groups tend to tie festivals to commercial opportunity or fundraising for projects. In New York State, fall foliage has become one of the state's most popular travel seasons, according to a fall 2010 report of ILOVENY. Numerous Web sites are devoted to "leaf-peeping" in rural villages, during driving tours and from trains. Throughout Pennsylvania, marketers even position digital cameras above forest canopies that every half-hour transmit live images of the changing foliage over the Internet. Visitors track the progress of the changing leaves by clicking leaf icons that represent cameras in different parts of the state.

With rare exception, the best fall foliage tends to be the province of rural places. So, for example, for more than 50 years, five rural Vermont villages have combined in the annual Northeast Kingdom Fall Foliage Festival to promote visits with shows and sales of local crafts, hymn sings, band concerts, church suppers and historical tours. For even longer, the Warner Fall Foliage Festival in central New Hampshire has tied vibrant fall colors to food, entertainment, carnival rides, and crafts along the town's main streets. Morgan County, Ind., hosts card parties, photography and poetry contexts, art shows, "bargain nights," basketball shootouts, bed races, remote control airplane shows, a 5K Run/Walk, a carnival, parade, classic car shows and more in its effort to extend visitor stays.

2. Established Wildflower Tourism

North Carolina highways epitomize wildflowers' appeal. Brilliant themed displays are carefully planned and tended by the North Carolina Department of Transportation Wildflower Program, the mainstay of a powerful partnership among public, nonprofit and private sectors. More than 1,500 acres of wildflower plantings spread along roadsides. Partners include the North Carolina-based crafts cooperative HandMade in America, the North Carolina Garden Club, major companies and citizen journalists. North Carolina tourism promotion ties wildflowers to wildlife viewing and birding, as well as to architecture and stylish living. Revenue from the sale of specialty license plates is the principle source of program funding. For a glimpse of the program, see <http://www.wral.com/lifestyles/travel/video/8592174/#/vid8592174>

Regions tend to meld wildflower tourism with other aspects of the natural world to stage diverse events that have larger appeal. For instance, the University of North Carolina and Botanical Gardens at Asheville join forces to offer an annual Wildflower and Bird Pilgrimage in late April. The event features two days of walks, talks, field trips and a plant sale that capitalize on the area's superb Appalachian setting.



In Richardson, Texas, the North Texas Wildflower Arts and Music Festival combines pop culture with wildflowers (<http://goldieloooodworks.blogspot.com/2010/05/more-wildflowers.html>). In the Blue Ridge Mountains; wildflowers combine with art and crafts (<http://www.handmadeinamerica.org/artists/ronnie-hughes>).

Established festivals have begun adopting larger cultural and civic goals that they satisfy with programming and, in a more complex way, by connecting with a wide range of partners to help overcome the highs and lows of seasonal economies and to re-position how destinations as a whole are viewed.

The five-day Spring Wildflower Pilgrimage and Greener Living Expo in Gatlinburg, Tenn., now in its seventh decade, has become so large that it now charges \$40 for one-day attendance and \$75 for two or more days (no refunds). In 2010, the exposition introduced sustainability themes. While the festival continues to feature birding; wildflower, fern, terrestrial insect, and history walks; salamander forays, and photo contests, it also has embraced programs of larger cultural outreach that invoke affordably healthful living, including things such as forest foods and pharmacy, composting and organic gardening, herb lore, wildflower-impacting climate change through the southern Appalachians, water pollution and aquatic life, and, notably, Baby Steps Toward Greening Our Planet. A distinctly mainstream and corporate roster of corporate interests helps underwrite the festival, including Estates at Norton Creek, Clayton Homes, Gettelfinger Properties, Haslam Family Foundation, Pilot Travel Centers, Citizens National Bank, Anderson Media Corp., Knoxville News Sentinel, and Scripps Networks (<http://www.springwildflowerpilgrimage.org/wildflower/PDFs/2010%20SWP%20Brochure.pdf>).

Perhaps best known and most existentially integrative of wildflower celebrations is the weeklong Crested Butte Wildflower Festival, which takes place each July in southwestern Colorado. From its outset in the mid-1980s, the event benefited from good fit with an already popular year-round tourism economy where leadership quickly grasped the chance to extend its annual promotional calendar. This area of Gunnison County emerged for skiing in the mid-1960s and ever since has made the Crested Butte name its regional brand.

Gunnison County remains largely a wilderness of almost 2 million acres. Winter sports enthusiasts have come since the 1960s for world-class alpine skiing and snowboarding at Crested Butte Mountain Resort; also for snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing and ice fishing. Gunnison-Crested Butte is also a haven for outdoors summer activities. In warmer months, visitors hike, climb, mountain bike, boat, whitewater raft, kayak, fly-fish, camp and ride horseback. Throughout the year, visitors enjoy distinctive restaurants and lodgings that include a hostel, rustic inns, guest cabins, B&Bs and full-service resort hotels as well as one-of-a-kind shops and cultural opportunities that also incorporate quaint and historic towns of Pitkin, Gothic, Tin Cup, Marble, Powderhorn, Almont and Crystal.

Gunnison (population 5,520 residents) has the Gunnison-Crested Butte Regional Airport, served year-round by United Airlines with flights from Denver and, during winter, by American Airlines and Delta, with flights from major hubs. The county also contains Gunnison Whitewater Park, Gunnison Valley Observatory, Pioneer Museum and Western State College. Both Crested Butte and Gunnison have thriving historic central business districts.



The Crested Butte Wildflower Festival began in 1986 after a local businessman visited flower festivals in Europe. With the help of the Crested Butte Chamber of Commerce, a volunteer committee was formed. In 1990, the General Assembly of Colorado designated the region the "Wildflower Capital of Colorado" at the urging of regional politicians. Today, the Wildflower Festival operates as a nonprofit, volunteer-driven organization. Tourism became a major factor when the Gunnison-Crested Butte Tourism Association joined in 2002 (www.gunnisoncrestedbutte.com).

The wildflower festival offers more than 200 events and classes and employs dozens of residents. A small advertising budget goes chiefly into marketing online. The event resists sponsorships, preferring instead to charge by event and depend on volunteers to run it. Hikes cost from \$35 to \$80, a photo class from \$40 to \$120, a cooking class around \$50. Despite high registration fees, a survey in 2009 showed a typical party of two to four people spends about \$1,300, so that in any year festival receipts range between \$500,000 and \$2 million.

A looming threat for 30 years has kept town and tourism interests in the vanguard of opposition to a molybdenum mine on a mountain adjacent to Mt. Crested Butte. So far the destination has successfully managed the threat.

Here in Florida, DeLand's annual Florida Wildflower & Garden Festival in 2010 attracted 9,000 people and won the Secretary of State's Award for Outstanding Special Event. To stage the event in historic downtown DeLand, for-profit MainStreet DeLand partners with the nonprofit Florida Wildflower Foundation, DeLand Garden Club, Florida Museum of Art and the county extension office. In its sixth year, the free seven-hour street festival has an estimated financial impact of \$130,000. Organizers enrich the experience with a roster of presentations by wildflower and gardening experts, as well as demonstrations and live entertainment. During the third and fourth years of the festival, field trips were made available. Those were dropped because of transportation logistics and no-shows.

Best Practices

The following best practices help attract visitors to enjoy the beauty of Florida native wildflowers:

- *Commit to less mowing, giving naturally occurring native wildflowers more time and more space to grow.* This requires rural communities to understand and accept of a more natural and wild aesthetic, appropriate to the rural character. Local elected officials need to publicly express their commitment, and direct state and local roadside managers to develop and implement improved roadside mowing schedules and practices.
- *Plant and manage wildflowers in public places, similar in scale and form of public rose gardens common in many southern towns.* Public displays of wildflowers are a visible indicator of a community's economic and environmental sustainability. Even small public gardens and meadows demonstrate leadership and stewardship, and teach others to do the same.
- *Ask everyone to plant regionally adapted native wildflower seeds and plants.* Distribute information about what grows best and how and when to plant, and how to manage a sustainable wildflower garden or meadow.



- *Ask local wildflower experts and enthusiasts to help.* Wildflower experts and enthusiasts may be members of the Florida Wildflower Foundation, Florida Native Plant Society, Florida Federation of Garden Clubs, Florida State Beekeepers Association, Florida Master Gardeners, Friends of St. Marks Wildlife Refuge, Friends of Wakulla Springs State Park, and other environmental and outdoor activity organizations.
- *Establish regional leadership and partnerships.* Partnerships among stakeholders – including tourism entities, corporations, hoteliers, local government, schools, and civic and non-profit organizations – are necessary for a route or a place to become well known for the seasonal beauty of its wildflowers. Wildflowers and artistic representation of wildflowers need to become commonly visible in yards, porches, windows, mail boxes, media, businesses, schools, churches, galleries, gift shops, parks and parking lots.
- *Engage volunteers to participate.* Volunteers are needed to provide wildflower management expertise, advocacy, promotion and in-kind donations of products.
- *Leverage affiliate marketing programs* (i.e., Visit Florida, Viva Florida, Florida Scenic Highway Program, FDACS Fresh from Florida or Native from Florida). Affiliate programs are needed to provide market exposure at low to no cost.
- *Personalize the experience of wildflowers.* Participants’ experiences are enriched when they can choose programs that most closely fit their interests. Hands-on experiences are particularly valued.
- *Leverage regional features and natural and cultural resources.* Access to natural lands, historic towns, museums and wildflower-related activities (hiking, birding, paddling) are important elements that enrich and lengthen visits.
- *Designate a day, week or month as Wildflower time/season. Designate a place as Wildflower capital/center of the region, state or nation.* Allowing a place or route to be handily associated with the beauty of wildflowers projects a positive message for visitors and investors.

Readiness

The Florida Wildflower Foundation is committed to the establishment of Florida wildflower tourism, especially in rural areas where blooms are most profuse. Universally, wildflowers are an attraction, bringing people closer to nature.

FWF representatives are working with Panhandle organizations and county and state tourism officials to leverage this lovely natural commodity. Meanwhile, Gadsden, Leon and Wakulla counties positioned themselves as state leaders when, in 2009 and 2010, each adopted a resolution recognizing the heritage, cultural and environmental importance of Florida’s native flowers. During the same time span, the Florida Wildflower Foundation hired two prominent biologists to survey naturally occurring wildflowers along routes in Florida. Their recent three-season report confirmed that the Panhandle holds many of the best places in the state, if not in the whole lower Southeast, to view vast stands of roadside wildflowers.

Together, the Panhandle and Big Bend regions have the largest portions of undeveloped and public-owned lands in the state. Wakulla County advertises “73 percent of its natural land and 85 percent of its coastline in public ownership.” The region also has multiple historic towns waiting to be explored.



For example, Sopchoppy – Wakulla’s unhurried old-Florida community – has a railroad depot and other buildings on the National Register of Historic Places. The town is a Gateway Community of the Florida Trail Association and close to the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, Apalachicola National Forest and Wakulla Springs State Park. A draw for musicians and artists, the town is probably best known for its annual Worm Gruntin’ Festival in April. Another April event is the Wakulla Wildlife Festival, which features a week of “Wild About Wakulla” events that serve up food, culture and heritage. Other festivals celebrate monarch butterflies, mullet, blue crabs and Arbor Day. Nearby Panacea has the Big Bend Maritime Center and Gulf Coast Specimen Laboratory.

Dixie, Gilchrist and Levy counties are tied by the Nature Coast State Trail. Tourism primarily is tied to outdoor activities, including its springs, rivers and Gulf Coast fishing villages. Stellar features include the Suwannee River and its tributaries and state parks such as Fanning Springs and Manatee Springs.

The Florida Wildflower Foundation, Florida Federation of Garden Clubs’ members, and area chapters of the Florida Native Plant Society are already working with FDOT to manage roadside mowing at several Panhandle test plots. Additionally, FDOT’s wildflower program has established plantings on several of the region’s prominent state and U.S. highways and interstates. More wildflower roadway management is needed and **must come by request from the counties themselves.**

Meanwhile, the Foundation has applied for a Visit Florida 2011 grant to develop and distribute a “Panhandle Wildflowers” brochure featuring driving routes that take in the best spring, summer and fall displays. Partnering counties and organizations will distribute the brochure, which also will be available at state Welcome Centers.

Five of the six counties focused on for this effort have tourism administrations, state agricultural extension agencies and regional planning councils. All recognize nature as one of their largest assets. None, however, figures large in Florida tourism (which is also the case with respect to fall foliage in most of the states where rural towns promote changing leaves).

Perhaps the two largest obstacles to be overcome are:

- **Regional Leadership:** If wildflower viewing is to be established on a large scale as a regional activity, a leader or leaders (individual, institutional, or governmental) of the effort must emerge. Many counties have their own tourism administrations, and some partner in other efforts, such as Natural North Florida (Gadsden, Leon, Wakulla, Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, Taylor, Lafayette, Gilchrist, Dixie, Levy and Alachua counties).

Dixie County assigns its tourism marketing to the tri-county Pure Water Wilderness association that also includes Gilchrist and Levy counties, and to Natural North Florida. Gadsden County is working on a new Tourist Development Strategic Plan, under review since November 2009. The North Florida Economic Development Partnership includes Dixie, Gilchrist and Levy counties as well as another 11 spanning Taylor east to Putnam. The nonprofit Florida’s Eden promotes environment, education and economy in a 30-county region between the Apalachicola River and the Atlantic and the Georgia-Florida line and, in one place, to Interstate 4.



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Wakulla County, however, stands apart in its organizational infrastructure and readiness for existential tourism. Wakulla centers its inward-focused outlook for combining tourism with sustainable development through Tallahassee Community College (TCC), where one program emphasizing economic development and workforce development is heavily focused on nature-based businesses. More than 100 people have completed a 90-hour, Wakulla-based TCC Green Guide certificate program for nature-based businesses. One outgrowth is a Florida Green Guide Association that includes 35 program graduates.

- Hotel rooms: The rural fabric of the Panhandle/Big Bend region has not been conducive to the development of hotels with more than 50 rooms. Wakulla, for instance, has only two hotels that have a combined 128 rooms. It also has fish camps, a motel and a bed and breakfast, which have about 40 rooms. Gilchrist has but one hotel.

Conclusion

Wildflower tourism marketing is part of ecotourism marketing, which needs a carefully thought-through process that results in regional leadership. The 2013 Quincentennial celebration represents an excellent and logical opportunity to launch wildflower viewing in the Panhandle. Other areas of the state may follow after a sustainable model is established there.